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ABSTRACT

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is briefly described. The NAEP was designed in 1969 as a voluntary cooperative program to answer questions about education nationally. In 1988, the NAEP was defined as a means of improving the effectiveness of the nation's schools by making objective information available about student performance. The NAEP, commonly known as the Nation's Report Card, is an ongoing, comparable, and representative assessment of what American students know and can do at grades 4, 8, and 12. It serves to monitor progress toward the National Education Goals adopted by the President and state governors in 1990. A new dimension has been added to the NAEP with the Trial State Assessment in 1990, a voluntary assessment of eighth-grade mathematics achievement that states can use to compare themselves over time. The America 2000 strategy of the Bush administration will depend on NAEP tests for its formative stages. The NAEP does not promote or drive a national curriculum, but it does describe achievement for those whose job it is to prescribe educational policy. (SLD)

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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS IN BRIEF

National Center for Education Statistics

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National Assessment of Educational Progress in Brief

Scant numbers of us can conjure up pleasant memories when we think of report cards. Ah, to be one of those happy few who received rave reports in every subject—with outstanding attendance, effort, and behavior! For most people, report cards were a necessary event of school, and our performance over time was a more accurate barometer of our achievement than any individual report. We may remember the lecture or the praise, but it was the comparison of this year's report with last year's that fueled our parents' hopes or fears.

Although report cards may be time-honored indicators of individual performance, the notion of a report card as an indicator of national achievement is relatively new.

Why do we need the National Assessment of Educational Progress?

The idea of an indicator of student achievement at the national level first emerged in 1963, when then Commissioner of Education Frank Keppel decided to collect information on how well the Nation's schools were doing. In 1969, a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was designed as a voluntary, cooperative program to answer questions such as: Are students learning more today than they did in the past? Is greater progress being made in some subject areas than in others? What education problems exist nationally?

Current legislation, passed in 1988, defines the purpose of NAEP as a means to "improve the effectiveness of our Nation's schools by making objective information about student performance in selected learning areas available to policymakers at the national, regional, state, and local levels."

Over the past 20 years, NAEP has generated more than 200 reports spanning 11 instructional areas. Commonly known as "the Nation's report card," it is the only ongoing, comparable, and representative assessment of what U.S. students know and can do. It is a unique resource for monitoring student achievement in the United States.

In April 1991, the President unveiled a new education strategy entitled "AMERICA 2000" designed to move the country toward the National Education Goals that were adopted by the President and the Governors in 1990. The National Education Goals Panel, set up to determine the most appropriate measures of progress toward the goals and to make annual reports, is working on ways to use NAEP data to describe progress toward student achievement.

Beyond measuring progress toward the national goals, NAEP is an integral part of our evaluation of the condition and progress of education in the Nation. Its data enable us to compare and contrast what has been learned about successful practice with what teachers and students report is happening in American classrooms.

Starting with the 1990 assessment, NAEP will have sufficient data to report on the performance of private as well as public schools.

What is NAEP?

NAEP reports on U.S. student performance with comprehensive information about what students at grades 4, 8, and 12 know and can do in various subject areas. It provides descriptions of students' strengths and weaknesses in basic and higher-order skills; comparisons of achievement by race/ethnicity, gender, type of community, and region; and trends in performance across the years. It also describes relationships (not causal) between achievement and certain background variables collected about students (i.e, homework, employment, reading materials in the home, TV watching) and about instruction (amounts of instructional time and hands-on learning).

How does NAEP work?

NAEP is a congressionally mandated project of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), carried out through competitive awards to qualified organizations. Currently, the project is conducted under contract by Educational Testing Service (ETS) (Princeton, New Jersey), with its subcontractors, Westat, Inc. (Rockville, Maryland), and National Computer Systems (Iowa City, Iowa).

NAEP reports directly to the Commissioner of Education Statistics, who is also responsible for providing continuing reviews—including validation studies and solicitation of public comment—on the project's conduct and usefulness.

In the 1988 Hawkins-Stafford Amendments (P.L. 100–297), Congress created the National Assessment Governing Board to formulate the policy guidelines for NAEP. The Board is responsible for selecting subject areas to be assessed (which may be in addition to those specified by Congress); identifying appropriate achievement goals for each age and grade; developing assessment objectives; developing test specifications; designing the assessment methodology; developing guidelines and standards for data analysis and for reporting and disseminating results; developing standards and procedures for interstate, regional, and national comparisons; improving the form and use of NAEP; and ensuring that all the selected items are free from racial, cultural, gender, or regional bias.

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The NAEP development process ensures that none of its assessments is tied to any single method of instruction or any individual curriculum. This impartiality is achieved through a nationwide consensus-building process. It involves a large number of people who represent various points of view on instruction and testing as well as a variety of professional positions in education.

Every 2 years, NAEP assesses nationally representative samples of more than 120,000 students aged 9, 13, and 17. Recently, the project added samples of the Nation's 4th, 8th, and 12th graders and collected information about their classroom experiences, interactions with teachers, and home support for learning. Students are selected randomly and their names are not collected. NAEP does not provide individual student or school-specific results. Scientific sampling procedures ensure reliable national and regional results. Since schools are sampled and no one student is asked to participate for more than an hour, the burden on schools and students is slight.

Trial State Assessment

The Hawkins-Stafford Amendments added a new dimension to NAEP, authorizing—on a trial basis in 1990—a voluntary assessment of eighth-grade mathematics at the state level. In spring 1990, data were collected on the mathematics achievement of a stratified random sample of public school eighth grade students in 37 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories. Those results will be available on June 6, 1991, providing policymakers with more and better state-level information. The legislation precludes the use of data from this trial effort to compare or rank schools, districts, or individual students within states. Rather, the data will be used as an indicator against which states can compare themselves over time. States may also compare the mathematics proficiency of their eighth graders with that of eighth graders in the Nation as a whole and in other states.

AMERICA 2000 calls for development of a new, voluntary, nationwide examination system called the American Achievement Tests that will be given in five core subjects: English, math, history, geography, and science. These tests would be tied to world class standards that will be developed in conjunction with the National Education Goals Panel. In addition Congress will be asked to authorize NAEP regularly to collect state-level data in grades 4, 8, and 12 in all five core subjects, beginning in 1994 and to permit use of NAEP tests at district and school levels by states that wish to do so. Since the new standards and achievement test system will take some years to develop fully, individualized versions of NAEP tests will be prepared as interim tests.

What are NAEP's Strengths?

NAEP gives estimates for "group" performance—that is, it tells educators how students across the country or across a state are doing. Thus, NAEP is an *indicator* of achievement. Although NAEP results don't directly help *individual* schools or students improve performance, they provide a benchmark for states or districts to measure against. States or districts wishing to collect their own data on similar topics can see where they are in relation to everyone else and in what direction they should head.

NAEP data help administrators understand their own schools in relation to national trends and add depth to discussions of policy at the local level. School professionals responsible for choosing the means to the end of improved student performance can use NAEP as an impartial source of information about patterns across time. For example, the data suggest that while student learning of facts and basic skills has improved slightly over the past 20 years, more advanced reasoning abilities—higher-order thinking skills—have declined. This sort of information may encourage school administrators to ask what kinds of readings and academic work assignments enable students to understand and develop ideas about the material at hand; how do teachers and students spend time in the classroom; and what kinds of classroom activities encourage students to master the facts, explore their implications, and reason persuasively.

NAEP helps teachers and administrators understand the national climate of assessment and emphasis on student performance. Furthermore, it can answer such questions as what are the discrepancies between what we know from research to be good practice and what is happening in schools; is my school following or leading national trends; and are national instructional problems or gaps also the ones my school faces?

What are NAEP's Limitations?

School-based tests provide curriculum-specific results so that teachers and administrators can alter classroom practice. As currently designed, NAEP cannot provide the kind of diagnostic data that relate to individual students. Instead, it profiles the performance of groups of youngsters at a given time—and across time—without promoting particular approaches in curriculum or prescribing actions for particular school districts. Therefore, NAEP by itself is an inappropriate tool for making local decisions. Yet, combined with other information, NAEP is a valuable resource for making comparisons and is one piece of assessment information that teachers, administrators, and policymakers ought to consider as they make decisions about schools.

NAEP does not promote or drive a national curriculum. Rather, NAEP represents what a variety of subject-matter experts agree that students reasonably might be expected to know and be able to do. Reports *describe* American students' academic achievement, providing background for those whose job it is to *prescribe* action based on the facts at hand.

For further information on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, contact Gary W. Phillips, Acting Associate Commissioner, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208–5653, or call (202) 219–1761.

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